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War and Love

By RICHARD ALDINGTON

IMAGES—OLD AND NEW

WAR AND LOVE

(1915-1918)

BY

RICHARD ALDINGTON



BOSTON
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY
1919

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The Four Seas Press
Boston, Mass., U. S. A.

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FOREWORD

To F. S. Flint:

I would like to dedicate this little book to you since, among my friends, you will I think be most likely to understand, through similar experiences, the moods it attempts to express.

Like "Images" this little book comes out of a conflict, but whereas in the former the conflict was of the spirit here it is of the flesh. "Images" consisted of short-hand notes, as it were, to illustrate the moods of a spirit torn between the beauty one imagines and the ugliness that is thrust upon one. The conclusion—if any—that I wanted drawn was a kind of tolerance, an affection for "carnal wisdom" as well as for "divine wisdom." I don't think I succeeded; the matter was not interesting to most readers and the manner—more or less novel at the time—repelled many who might otherwise have been interested.

Here I have written less for myself and you and others who are interested in subtleties and more for the kind of men I lived with in camp and in the line. (That they did not understand very much is a matter for cheerful acceptance.) Perhaps I have lost something by this; but you must know that, in intention at least, this is a book by a common soldier for common soldiers.

FOREWORD

Just now I spoke of conflict; I did not mean war in its universal or journalistic sense but in its impingement upon the individual. These notations of moods attempt to express that conflict between the delight of the flesh, which we call love or passion, and that agony of the flesh which is known only to the infantrymen of the line.

Even you may feel that these notes on war are overstrained, morbidly self-conscious, petulant perhaps. That may be, but (taking into account all enthusiasms and devotions) I affirm that they represent to some degree the often inarticulate feelings of the ordinary civilized man thrust suddenly into these extraordinary and hellish circumstances—feelings of bewilderment, bitterness, dumb revolt and rather piteous weakness. Poor human flesh is so easily rent by the shattering of explosive and the jagged shear of metal. Those of us who have seen it will never be quite happy again.

You may feel also an almost exaggerated passion or sensualism in the second part of the book. That may be, but it expresses the soldier's mood; a reckless and disregard of rules for conduct, a yearning of the flesh, a wild grasping at life.

I think I have told you that when I came back from France last year I was quite overwhelmed by the beauty there seemed to be in women's faces. Well, can you understand that after those endless days of mud and destruction and racked nerves the body is wrought up to such an intensity that the passion of love becomes almost unendurable in its piercing beauty?

FOREWORD

After the war if we are both still alive—which seems highly improbable—we shall have much to talk of and this little book will be a sort of memoir of the last two years, rather poignant to me and a little pathetic in that it falls so short of what it attempts. The army is not an ideal environment for literature.

Yours ever,

RICHARD ALDINGTON

February, 1919

A few of these poems have appeared before in books and periodicals, as follows: *Some Imagist Poets*, 1917 (Houghton Mifflin Co., & Constable); *New Paths*, (1918) C. W. Beaumont, London); *Reverie*, 1917, (Privately printed, Cleveland, Ohio); *The Dial*; *The Seven Arts*; *The Egoist*.

CONTENTS

PART I

	Page
FOREWORD	5
PROEM	13
VICARIOUS ATONEMENT	14
LEAVE-TAKING	15
BONDAGE	16
A MOMENT'S INTERLUDE	18
DAWN	19
CAPTIVE	20
PRAYER	21
ON THE MARCH	22
OUR HANDS	23
FATIGUES	24
THE WINE CUP	25
SORCERY OF WORDS	27
THE LOVER	28
APRIL LIEDER	29
GENIUS LOCI	30
THREE LITTLE GIRLS	31
LIVING SEPULCHRES	32
MACHINE GUNS	33
PICKET I, II	34
THE FAUN COMPLAINS	35
TRENCH IDYLL	36
RATTLE-FIELD	38
"IVY AND VIOLET "	39
A RUINED HOUSE	40
TIME'S CHANGES	41
IN THE TRENCHES, I, II	42
A VILLAGE	44
BARRAGE	46
BOMBARDMENT	47

CONTENTS

	Page
A YOUNG TREE	48
DISDAIN	49
AN EARTH GODDESS	50
H. S. R.	52
E. T.	53
SOLILOQUY, I	54
SOLILOQUY, II	55
DAUGHTER OF ZEUS	56
DEFEAT	57
CIVILIANS	60
DOUBT	61
TERROR	63
APATHY	65
THE BLOOD OF THE YOUNG MEN	68
PART II	
PRELUDE	73
AN OLD SONG	74
SONG	75
SONG FOR HER	76
POSSESSION	77
AN INTERLUDE	78
BEFORE PARTING	79
PRAYER	81
"I DO NOT EVEN SCORN . . . "	83
ABSENCE	85
HER MOUTH	86
DAYBREAK	87
SLEEP	89
A SOLDIER'S SONG	90
NIGHTS OF LOVE	91
GAIN	92
POSTLUDE	93
EPILOGUE	94

PART I

War

"They said that this mystery never shall cease:
The priest promotes war, and the soldier peace.'

Blake.

PROEM

*Out of this turmoil and passion,
This implacable contest,
This vast sea of effort,
I would gather something of repose,
Some intuition of the inalterable gods,
Some Attic gesture.*

*Each day I grow more restless,
See the austere shape elude me,
Gaze impotently upon a thousand miseries
And still am dumb.*

May, 1917

VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

This is an old and very cruel god . . .

We will endure;
We will try not to wince
When he crushes and rends us.

If indeed it is for your sakes,
If we perish or moan in torture,
Or stagger under sordid burdens
That you may live—
Then we can endure.

If our wasted blood
Makes bright the page
Of poets yet to be;
If this our tortured life
Save from destruction's nails
Gold words of a Greek long dead;
Then we can endure,
Then hope,
Then watch the sun rise
Without utter bitterness.

But, O thou old and very cruel god,
Take, if thou canst, this bitter cup from us.

LEAVE-TAKING

Will the world still live for you
When I am gone?

Will the straight garden poppy
Still spout blood from its green throat
Before your feet?
Will the five cleft petals of the campion
Still be rose-coloured,
Like five murdered senses, for you?

Will your trees still live,
Thrust metallic bosses of leafage
From the hill-side in the summer light;
Will the leaves sway and grow darker,
Rustle, swirl in the gales;
Decay into gold and orange,
Crinkle and shrivel,
And fall silently at last
On to frosty grass?

Will there be sun for you;
The line of near hills
Cut out in thin blue steel
Against red haze?

Will there be silence?

Will not even the clean acrid sea
Turn stale upon your lips?

Will the world die for you
As it dies for me?

BONDAGE

I have been a spendthrift—
Dropping from lazy fingers
Quiet coloured hours,
Fluttering away from me
Like oak and beech leaves in October.

I have lived keenly and wastefully,
Like a bush or a sun insect—
Lived sensually and thoughtfully,
Loving the flesh and the beauty of this world—
Green ivy about ruined towers,
The out-pouring of the grey sea,
And the ecstasy
Of a pale clear sky at sunset.

I have been prodigal of love
For critics and for lonely places;
I have tried not to hate mankind;
I have gathered sensations
Like ripe fruits in a rich orchard...

All this is gone;
There are no leaves, no sea,
No shade of a rich orchard,
Only a sterile, dusty waste,
Empty and threatening.

I long vainly for solitude
And the lapse of silent hours;

I am frantic to throw off
My heavy cloth and leather garments,
To set free my feet and body;
And I am so far from beauty
That a yellow daisy seems to clutch my heart
With eager searching petals,
And I am grateful even to humility
For the taste of pure, clean bread.

A MOMENT'S INTERLUDE

One night I wandered alone from my comrades' huts;
The grasshoppers chirped softly
In the warm misty evening;
Bracken fronds beckoned from the darkness
With exquisite frail green fingers;
The tree gods muttered affectionately about me,
And from the distance came the grumble of a kindly
train.

I was so happy to be alone,
So full of love for the great speechless earth,
That I could have laid my cheek in the wet grasses
And caressed with my lips the hard sinewy body
Of Earth, the cherishing mistress of bitter lovers.

DAWN

The grim dawn lightens thin bleak clouds ;
In the hill-clefts beyond the flooded meadows
Lies death-pale, death-still mist.

We trudge along wearily,
Heavy with lack of sleep,
Spiritless, yet with pretence of gaiety.

The sun brings crimson to the colourless sky ;
Light gleams from brass and steel—
We trudge on wearily—

*O God, end this bleak anguish
Soon, soon, with vivid crimson death,
End it in mist-pale sleep !*

CAPTIVE

They have torn the gold tettinx
From my hair;
And wrenched the bronze sandals
From my ankles.

They have taken from me my friend
Who knew the holy wisdom of poets,
Who had drunk at the feast
Where Simonides sang.

No more do I walk the calm gardens
In the white mist of olives;
No more do I take the rose-crown
From the white hands of a maiden.

I, who was free, am a slave;
The Muses have forgotten me.
The gods do not hear me.

Here there are no flowers to love;
But afar off I dream that I see
Bent poppies and the deathless asphodel.

PRAAYER

I am a garden of red tulips
And late daffodils and bay-hedges,
A small sunk garden
About an oblong pool
With three grey lead Dutch tanks—
I am this garden shattered and blown
With a day-long western gale
And bursts of rapid rain.

There are dank petals in the ruffled waters,
And muddy flowers upon the path.
The grass is covered with torn leaves.

God of gardens, dear small god of gardens,
Grant me faint glow of sunlight,
A last bird hopping in the quiet haze,
Then let the night swoop swiftly,
Fold round and crush out life
For ever.

ON THE MARCH

Bright berries on the roadside,
Clear among your dusty leaves,
Red, mottled berries,
You are as beautiful
As the points of a girl's breasts ;
You are as firm and fresh . . .

Beauty of the morning sun
Among the red berries
Of early Setember,
You tear at my breast,
Your light crushes me
With memory of freedom lost
And warm hours blotted out.

I will throw away rifle and leather belt,
Straps, khaki and heavy nailed boots,
And run naked across the dewy grass
Among the firm red berries !
I will be free
And sing of beauty and the women of Hellas,
Of rent seas and the peace of olive gardens,
Of these rough meadows,
Of the keen welcome smell of London mud !
I will be free . . .

Party—HALT!

OUR HANDS

I am grieved for our hands, our hands that have caressed roses and women's flesh, old lovely books and marbles of Carrara. I am grieved for our hands that were so reverent in beauty's service, so glad of beauty of tressed hair and silken robe and gentle fingers, so glad of beauty of bronze and wood and stone and rustling parchment. So glad, so reverent, so white.

I am grieved for our hands . . .

December, 1916

FATIGUES

The weariness of this dirt and labour, of this dirty,
melting sky!

For hours we have carried great bundles of hay from
barge to truck, and from truck to train.

The weariness of this dirt and labour! But—look!
Last June those heavy dried bales waved and glit-
tered in the fields of England!

Cinque-foil and clover, buttercups, fennel, thistle and
rue—daisy and ragged robin, wild rose from the
hedge, shepherd's purse and long sweet nodding
stalks of grass!

Heart of me, heart of me, be not sick and faint though
fingers and arms and head ache; you bear the gift
of the glittering meadows of England. Here are
bundles from Somerset, from Wales, from Hereford,
Worcester, Gloucester—names we must love, scented
with summer peace.

Handle them bravely, meadow-sweet, sorrel, lush, flag
and arid knap-weed, flowers of marsh and cliff,
handle them bravely!

Dear crushed flowers! And you, yet fragrant grasses,
I stoop and kiss you furtively.

Dear gentle perished sisters, speak, whisper once more,
tell me next June again you will dance and whisper
in the wind.

THE WINE-CUP

Life was to us an amphora of wine
Pressed from full grapes
Upon the warm slopes of the Cyclades—
Wine that brings light
Into the gloomiest eyes of man,
Wine, cooled and mingled for the eager lip.

We had but gazed upon the amphora,
Touching the figures painted on its flanks—
Achilles reining in his four great horses
Or Mænads dancing to a Faun's pipe.

We had but sipped the wine,
Watching its changing hue—
Deep purple in the shadowy amphora
But crimson where the light
Pierces the crystal cup.

And if we thought:
“True, the cup soon is emptied,
The amphora rings hollow
And our veins lack warmth and life”—
It did but give a gentle melancholy
Making our present joy more keen and clear.

But now
Cold, terrible, unseen hands
Have dragged the cup from us;

We are distracted
As a poor goatherd of the Thracian hills
Robbed of his flock and sun-tanned wife
By Scythian robbers,
Hurrying in anguish to the unfriendly town
As we to death.

SORCERY OF WORDS

"The poetry of winter"—these words, remembered from some aesthetic essay, return and return to my memory with an ironic persistence. It happened yesterday when the ground was sheeted in frost. The sky rose upon the pale green coverlet of dawn, bare trees silhouetted, frozen pools of water.

"The poetry of winter"—yes, that was poetry, the breath of the gods—light glowing and changing, the motionless trees, clear air.

Yes, one can be hungry, sore, unshaven, dirty, eyes and head aching, limbs shivering, and yet love beauty.

From the depths I cry it, from the depths which echo with the ironic phrase "the poetry of winter," from the depths I cry it!

You, who are clean and warm in the delicate leisure of a flower-scented library, strain your hearing, listen across the clamour of the age, for a whisper that comes to you so faintly, so ironically—"the poetry of winter!"

THE LOVER

Though I have had friends
And a beautiful love
There is yet one lover I await above all.

She will not come to me
In the time of soft plum-blossoms
When the air is gay with birds singing
And the sky is a delicate caress;
She will come
From the midst of vast clamour
With a mist of stars about her
And great beckoning plumes of white smoke
Upon her leaping horses.

And she will bend suddenly and clasp me;
She will clutch me with fierce arms
And stab me with a kiss like a wound
That bleeds slowly.

But though she will hurt me at first
In her strong gladness
She will soon soothe me gently
And cast upon me an unbreakable sleep
Softly for ever.

APRIL LIEDER

I

When I rose up this morning
In a ruined town in France,
I heard the sparrows twitter
In gardens bare and grey
And watched the sunbeams dance.

O glad young April day!

II

When I lie down this evening
In a damp cellar of France
I'll hear the big guns booming
By bare and blasted lanes,
And watch the shrapnel dance.

O wild sad April rains!

GENIUS LOCI

This place is evil
Some bitter god dwells here.

For when I think here of my love's face
It is not tranquil,
Nor eager, nor passionate,
Nor flushed with desire,
Nor rejoicing in beauty,
But pale in anger against me
With determined eyes
Thwarting my will
And thrusting upon me langour,
Life-weariness.

Surely, surely, I know
There is evil in this place.

THREE LITTLE GIRLS

(FOR MY SISTERS)

Marianne, Madeline, Alys,
Three little girls I used to see
Two months ago,
Three little girls with fathers killed
And mothers lost,
Three little girls with broken shoes
And hard, sharp coughs,
Three little girls who sold us sweets
Too near the shells,
Three little girls with names of saints
And angels' eyes,
Three little girls where are you now?
Marianne, Madeline, Alys.

LIVING SEPULCHRES

One frosty night when the guns were still
I leaned against the trench
Making for myself *hokku*
Of the moon and flowers and of the snow:

But the ghostly scurrying of huge rats
Swollen with feeding upon men's flesh
Filled me with shrinking dread.

MACHINE GUNS

Gold flashes in the dark,
And on the road
Each side, behind, in front of us,
Gold sparks
Where the fierce bullets strike the stones.

In a near shell-hole lies a wounded man,
The stretcher-bearers bending over him;
And at our feet
Cower shrinkingly against the ground
Dark shadowy forms of men.

Only we two stand upright;
All differences of life and character smoothed out
And nothing left
Save that one foolish tie of caste
That will not let us shrink.

PICKET

I

First Watch: Night

The stars which night by night of late
Were plain to all men's eyes
Are veiled in cloud,
As my clear happy mind
In this brief solitude.

II

Last Watch: Dawn

Dusk and deep silence . . .

Three soldiers huddled on a bench
Over a red-hot brazier,
And a fourth one stands apart
Watching the cold rainy dawn.

Then the familiar sound of birds—
Clear cock-crow, caw of rooks,
Frail pipe of linnet, the “ting! ting!” of chaffinches,
And over all the lark
Outpiercing even the robin . . .

Wearily the sentry moves
Muttering the one word: “Peace.”

THE FAUN COMPLAINS

They give me aëroplanes
Instead of birds and moths ;
Instead of sunny fields
They give me mud-holes ;
And for my day-long, night-long sacred hush,
(Flutter of leaves, bee-murmurs in the flowers,
Ripe seeded grass just stirring into music)
A hush wherein one seemed to hear
The invisible wheels of burning stars
Echoing upon the tiled paths of heaven—
For this they give me noise,
Harsh clangours of breaking metal,
Abrupt huge bursts of flame.

And for my woodland playmates,
Dryads, yellow subtle fauns,
Naked wanton hamadryads,
And stealthy water-girls
Who stole my honey and fruits
When I lay sleeping by their pools—
For these they give me men,
Odd, loud-voiced, fearsome men,
Who mock my little horns and pointed ears !

TRENCH IDYLL

We sat together in the trench,
He on a lump of frozen earth
Blown in the night before,
I on an unexploded shell;
And smoked and talked, like exiles,
Of how pleasant London was,
Its women, restaurants, night clubs, theatres,
How at that very hour
The taxi-cabs were taking folk to dine...
Then we sat silent for a while
As a machine-gun swept the parapet.

He said:

"I've been here on and off two years
And seen only one man killed."

"That's odd."

"The bullet hit him in the throat;
He fell in a heap on the fire-step,
And called out: 'My God! *dead!*' "

"Good Lord, how terrible!"

"Well, as to that, the nastiest job I've had
Was last year on this very front
Taking the discs at night from men
Who'd hung for six months on the wire
Just over there.

The worst of all was
They fell to pieces at a touch.
Thank God we couldn't see their faces ;
They had gas helmets on . . . ”

I shivered ;
“It's rather cold here, sir; suppose we move?”

BATTLE-FIELD

The wind is piercing chill
And blows fine grains of snow
Over this shell-rent ground;
Every house in sight
Is smashed and desolate.

But in this fruitless land,
Thorny with wire
And foul with rotting clothes and sacks
The crosses flourish—
Ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît . . .
“Ci-gît i soldat Allemand,
Priez pour lui.”

"IVY AND VIOLET, WHAT DO YE HERE...?"

Sometimes in bitter mood I mock myself:
"Half ape, half ass, servant and slave,
Where are your dreams gone now,
Where your fierce pride?
Whither goes your youth?
And how will you dare touch again
Dear slender women with those disfigured hands?
Or bare your long dishonoured body
To the contemptuous sun?
How live after this shame?"

And all my answer:

"So that hate poison not my days,
And I still love the earth,
Flowers and all living things,
And my song still be keen and clear,
I can endure."

A RUINED HOUSE

Those who lived here are gone
Or dead or desolate with grief;
Of all their life here
Nothing remains
Except their trampled, dirtied clothes
Among the dusty bricks,
Their marriage bed, rusty and bent,
Thrown down aside as useless;
And a broken toy left by their child . . .

TIME'S CHANGES

Four years ago to-day in Italy
I gathered wild flowers for a girl—
Thick scented broom, wild sword-flowers,
The red anemones that line the ways
And the frail-throated freezia
Which lives beneath the orange boughs
And whose faint scent to me
Is love's own breath, its kiss . . .

To-day in sunless, barren fields
I gather heads of shells,
Splinters of shrapnel, cartridges . . .

What shall I gather
Four years from to-day?

IN THE TRENCHES

I

Not that we are weary,
Not that we fear,
Not that we are lonely
Though never alone—
Not these, not these destroy us;
But that each rush and crash
Of mortar and shell,
Each cruel bitter shriek of bullet
That tears the wind like a blade,
Each wound on the breast of earth,
Of Demeter, our Mother,
Wounds us also,
Severs and rends the fine fabric
Of the wings of our frail souls,
Scatters into dust the bright wings
Of Psyche!

II

Impotent,
How impotent is all this clamour,
This destruction and contest . . .

Night after night comes the moon
Haughty and perfect;
Night after night the Pleiades sing
And Orion swings his belt across the sky.
Night after night the frost
Crumbles the hard earth.

Soon the spring will drop flowers
And patient, creeping stalk and leaf
Along these barren lines
Where the huge rats scuttle
And the hawk shrieks to the carrion crow.

Can you stay them with your noise?
Then kill winter with your cannon,
Hold back Orion with your bayonets
And crush the spring leaf with your armies!

A VILLAGE

I

Now if you saw my village
You'd not think it beautiful,
But flat and commonplace—
As I'd have called it half a year ago . . .

II

But when you've pondered
Hour upon chilly hour in those damned trenches
You get at the significance of things,
Get to know, clearer than before,
What a tree means, what a pool,
Or a black, wet field in sunlight.

One gets to know,
In that shell-pierced silence
Under the unmoved, ironic stars,
How good love of the earth is.

So I go strolling,
Hands deep in pockets, head aslant,
And eyes screwed up against the light,
Just loving things
Like any other lunatic or lover.

III

For there's so much to love,
So much to see and understand,
So much naïveté, whimsicality,
Even in a dull village like this.

Pigeons and fowls about a pointed haystack ;
The red-tiled barns we sleep in ;
The profile of the distant town
Misty against the leaden-silver sky ;
Two ragged willows and a fallen elm
With an end of broken wall
Glimmering through evening mist—
All worthy Rembrandt's hand,
Rembrandt who loved homely things . . .

Then there's the rain pool where we wash,
Skimming the film-ice with our tingling hands ;
The elm-fringed dykes and solemn placid fields
Flat as a slate and blacker.

There's the church—
The poorest ever built I think—
With all its painted plaster saints
Straight from the rue St. Sulpice,
Its dreadful painted windows,
And Renaissance "St. Jacques le Majeur"
Over the porch . . .

IV

To-day the larks are up,
The willow boughs are red with sap,
The last ice melting on the dykes ;
One side there stands a row of poplars,
Slender amazons, martial and tall,
And on the other
The sunlight makes the red-tiled roofs deep orange . . .

BARRAGE

Thunder,
The gallop of innumerable Walkyrie impetuous for
battle,
The beating of vast eagle wings above Prometheus,
The contest of tall barbaric gods smitten by the ham-
mer of Thor,
Pursuit! Pursuit! Pursuit!
The huge black dogs of hell
Leaping, full-mouthed, in murderous pursuit!

BOMBARDMENT

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

The fifth day there came a hush ;
We left our holes
And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

A YOUNG TREE

(FOR J. W.)

There are so few trees here, so few young trees,
That Fate might have been merciful
And turned aside the shock of flame
That strewed your branches on the torn-up earth,
Ending the joy we had in your fresh leaves.

And every dear young lad that's killed
Seems to cry out:
"We are so few, so very few,
Could not our fate have been more merciful?"

DISDAIN

Have the gods then left us in our need
Like base and common men?
Were even the sweet grey eyes
Of Artemis a lie,
The speech of Hermes but a trick,
The glory of Apollonian hair deceit?

Desolate we move across a desolate land,
The high gates closed,
No answer to our prayer;
Naught left save our integrity,
No murmur against Fate
Save that we are juster than the unjust gods,
More pitiful than they.

April, 1917.

AN EARTH GODDESS

After the Advance, 1917

You are not the august Mother
Nor even one of her comely daughters,
But you gave shelter to men,
Hid birds and little beasts within your hands
And twined flowers in your hair.

Sister, you have been sick of a long fever,
You have been torn with throes
Fiercer than childbirth and yet barren;
You are plague-marked;
There are no flowers in your hair.

I have seen your anguish, O Sister,
I have seen your wounds.
But now there is come upon you peace,
A peace unbroken, profound,
Such as came upon the mother of King Eteocles
When both her sons were dead.
For in your agony, Sister,
When men bruised and ravished you,
You remembered the wide kindness of our mother
And gave shelter to each of them that rent you,
Shielded them from death with your delicate body,
And received their clotted corpses into your once pure
breast.

And now since you have endured,
Since for all your wrong and bitter pain

There came no hatred upon you
But only pity and anguish
Such as the mother of King Eteocles felt
Gazing upon her two angry sons—
Because of this, your peace is wonderful.

Underfoot are a few scant grasses
Amid rusty ruin;
Overhead the last of your larks
Cries shrilly before the broken clouds;
And for your sake, O my Sister,
O daughter of our great Earth-Mother,
Because of your old pain
And long-suffering and sweetness,
Because of the new peace
Which lies so deep upon you,
The chains of my bitterness are broken,
The weight of my despair leaves me.

H. S. R.

(Died of wounds, April, 1917)

You are dead—
You, the kindly, courteous,
You whom we loved,
You who harmed no man
Yet were brave to death
And died that other men might live.

Far purer, braver lips than mine should praise you,
Far nobler hands than mine record your loss,
Yet since your courteous high valour scorned no man,
I, who but loved you from the depths, can greet you,
Salute your grave and murmur, “Brother,
Hail and farewell! You are dead.”

E. T.

(Died of wounds, May, 1917)

You too are dead,
The coarse and ignorant,
Carping against all that was too high
For your poor spirit to grasp,
Cruel and evil-tongued—
Yet you died without a moan or whimper.

O, not I, not I should dare to judge you!
But rather leave with tears your grave
Where the sweet grass will cover all your faults
And all your courage too.

Brother, hail and farewell!

SOLILOQUY—I

No, I'm not afraid of death,
(Not very much afraid, that is)
Either for others or myself;
Can watch them coming from the line
On the wheeled silent stretchers
And not shrink,
But munch my sandwich stoically
And make a joke, when "it" has passed.

But—the way they wobble!—
God! that makes one sick.
Dead men should be so still, austere,
And beautiful,
Not wobbling carrion roped upon a cart . . .

Well, thank God for rum.

SOLILOQUY—II

I was wrong, quite wrong;
The dead men are not always carrion.

After the advance,
As we went through the shattered trenches
Which the enemy had left,
We found, lying upon the fire-step,
A dead English soldier,
His head bloodily bandaged
And his closed left hand touching the earth,

More beautiful than one can tell,
More subtly coloured than a perfect Goya,
And more austere and lovely in repose
Than Angelo's hand could ever carve in stone.

DAUGHTER OF ZEUS

(FOR J. C.)

"Tuerons la lune."—Marinetti.

No!

We will not slay the moon,
For she is the fairest of the daughters of Zeus,
Of the maidens of Olympus.

And though she be pale and yet more pale
Gazing upon dead men
And fierce disastrous strife,
Yet for us she is still a frail lily
Floating upon a calm pool—
Still a tall lady
Comforting our human despair.

DEFEAT

Though our hearts were mad and strong
With love for you,
Though we fought for you,
Though our remnant struggled
And not one was false,
We are beaten.

Beauty, for your sake we are lost,
For you we are crushed,
Scorn and bitterness are cast at us,
And fools who hate you
Are preferred to us.

Treacherous wonderful lady,
Despoina! Basilea! Potnia!
You have betrayed us—
Yet, hurt and overwhelmed and in despair
We can but turn to you again
And sing our love for you.

White goddess of beauty,
Take these roses—
It is our blood that colours them;
Take these lilies—
White as our intense hearts;
Take these wind-flowers—
Frail as our strength spent in your service;
Take these hyacinths—
Graven with the sigh of our lost days;
Take these narcissus blooms
Lovely as your naked breasts.

White goddess of beauty,
Though the stars rose against you
And the steeds of the day
Were arrayed against you,
Though the might of the sea
And the menace of night
Were against you,
We would be with you
And worship you.

Ah, goddess! Lovely, implacable,
What wine shall we bring,
What cup for your lips?
Blood, blood of our hearts for a drink,
Our lives for a cup.

White grape and red grape and pale
Dim scarlet of wearied mouths,
Flowers and the music of trees,
Hills golden with sun
And the sea, still and blue and divine—
These are yours
But not ours.

We are scorned for your sake,
We are broken,
Ah, Goddess! You turn from our pain!
And once we begged of you death,
Death, quiet and smiling,
Death cold as the wind of the sea.

Now, love has lighted our hearts,
Now, though we are beaten and crushed,
Grant us life.

Grant us life to suffer for you,
To feed your delicate lips
With the strength of our blood,
To crown you with flowers of our pain
And hail you with cries of our woe,
Yet sweet and divine.

Grant us life!
If we die there is none upon earth
To feed the fierce pride of your heart;
There is none so fine and so keen,
There is none to sing at your feast.

Grant us life,
And gold lyre and box-wood pipe
Shall sound from hill-top and shore,
From the depth of the city street,
From under the horror of battle,
Faint as we faint in despair,
Yet clear in your praise.

We dream of white crags,
Skies changing and swift,
Of rain upon earth,
Of flowers soft as your fingers
And bright as your garments of love.

We have none of these things;
Only strife and despair and pain,
Lands hideous and days disfigured,
A grey sea and a muddy shore.
But for you we forget all this,
We forget our defeat,
All, all, for your sake.

CIVILIANS

Why should you try to crush me?
Am I so Christ-like?

You beat against me,
Immense waves, filthy with refuse.
I am the last upright of a smashed break-water
But you shall not crush me
Though you bury me in foaming slime
And hiss your hatred about me.

You break over me, cover me ;
I shudder at the contact ;
Yet I pierce through you
And stand up, torn, dripping, shaken,
But whole and fierce.

DOUBT

I

Can we, by any strength of ours,
Thrust back this hostile world
That tears us from ourselves,
As a child from the womb,
A weak lover from light breasts?

Is there any hope?
Can we believe
That not in wild perversity,
In blinding cruelty,
Has flesh torn flesh,
Has soul been torn from soul?

Must we despair?
Throw back upon the gods this taunt
That even their loveliest is at best
Some ineffectual lie?

II

Sand in the gale whirls up,
Pricks and stifles our flesh,
Blinds and deafens our sense
So that we cannot hear
The crumbling downfall of the waves
Nor see the limpid sunlight any more.

But could we thrust from us
This threat, this misery,

Borrow the mountain's strength
As now its loneliness,
Hurl back this menace on itself,
Crush bronze with bronze—
Why, it would be as if some tall slim god,
Unburdened of his age-long apathy,
Took in his hand the thin horn of the moon
And set it to his lips
And blew sharp wild shrill notes
Such as our hearts, our lonely hearts,
Have yearned for in the dumb bleak silences.

III

Ah! Weak as wax against their bronze are we,
Ah! Faint as reed-pipes by the water's roar,
And driven as land-birds by the vast sea wind.

TERROR

I

Those of the earth envy us,
Envy our beauty and frail strength;
Those of the wind and the moon
Envy our pain.

II

For as a doe that has never born child
We were swift to fly from terror;
And as fragile edged steel
We turned, we pierced, we endured.

III

We have known terror:
The terror of the wind and silent shadows,
The terror of great heights,
The terror of the worm,
The terror of thunder and fire,
The terror of water and slime,
The terror of horror and fear,
The terror of desire and pain—
The terror of apathy.

IV

As a beast, as an arrow of pine,
Terror cleft us,
Tore us in envy away,
So that for month upon month
Pain wore us, hope left us, despair clutched us.

For they of the earth envied us,
Envied our beauty and strength.

V

Yet because, though we faltered and wept,
We held fast, clung close to our love,
Scorned hate even as they scorned us,
Some god has lightened our lives,
Given back the cool mouth of song
And the hands that blossom of fire,
Given too the month crushed like a flower
Which unpetals in marvellous ways,
The limbs that are hard and straight
With maidenly thews and blood,
Given these so that day is aflame
And night shot golden with shafts.

VI

We have suffered, we have bled,
And those of the wind and the moon
Envy our pain, the pain of the terror,
The delight no terror could slay.

APATHY

Come down the road and do not speak.
You cannot know how strange it is
To walk upon a grey firm road again,
To feel the noiseless waves of air break on one's flesh.

You do not speak, you do not look at me ;
Just walk in silence on the grey firm road
Guessing my mood by instinct, not by thought—
For there is no weapon of tongue or glance
So keen that it can stir my apathy,
Can stab that bitterness to hope,
Can pierce the humour to despair.

Silence fits the mood then—silence and you.

The trees beside the road—can you interpret
These fragments of leaf-music,
Here a phrase, here a sort of melody
That dies to silence or is broken
By a full rustling that is discord ?
Can you interpret such a simple thing ?

Can I interpret this blank apathy,
This humourous bitterness ?

Lean on the bridge now—do not speak—
And watch the coloured water slipping past,
While I struggle with myself,
Confront half-impulses, half-desires,
Grapple with lustreless definitions,

Grin at my inarticulate impotence
And so fall back on—apathy!

The bridge has three curved spans,
Is made of weathered stones,
And rests upon two diamond-pointed piers—
Is picturesque.

(I have not lost all touch and taste for life,
See beauty just as keenly, relish things.)

The water here is black and specked with white;
Under that tree the shallows grow to brown,
Light amber where the sunlight straggles through—
But yet, what colour is it if you watch the reeds
Or if you only see the trees' reflection?

Flat on the surface rest the lily leaves
(Some curled up inwards, though, like boats)
And yellow heads thrust up on fine green throats.
Two—three—a dozen—watch now—demoiselle flies
Flicker and flutter and dip and rest
Their beryl-green or blue, dark Prussian blue, frail
wings
On spits and threads of water-plant.
Notice all carefully, be precise, welcome the world.
Do I miss these things? Overlook beauty?
Not even the shadow of a bird
Passing across that white reflected cloud.

And yet there's always something else—
The way one corpse held its stiff yellow fingers
And pointed, pointed to the huge dark hole
Gouged between ear and jaw right to the skull . . .

Did I startle you? What was the matter?
Just a joke they told me yesterday,
Really, really, not for ladies' ears.
Forgive me; I'll not laugh so suddenly again.

THE BLOOD OF THE YOUNG MEN

I

Give us back the close veil of the senses,
Let us not see, ah, hide from us
The red blood splashed upon the walls,
The good red blood, the young, the lovely blood
Trampled unseeingly by passing feet,
Feet of the old men, feet of the cold cruel women,
Feet of the careless children, endlessly passing . . .

II

Day has become an agony, night alone now,
That leisurely shadow, hides the blood-stains,
The horrible stains and clots of day-time.

III

All the garments of all the people,
All the wheels of all the traffic,
All the cold indifferent faces,
All the fronts of the houses,
All the stones of the street—
Ghastly! Horribly smeared with blood-stains.

IV

The horror of it!
When a woman holds out a white hand
Suddenly to know it drips black putrid blood;
When an old man sits, serene and healthy,
In clean white linen, with clean white hair,

Suddenly to know the linen foully spotted,
To see the white hair streaked with dripping blood.

V

O these pools and ponds of blood,
Slowly dripped in, slowly brimming lakes,
Blood of the young men, blood of their bodies,
Squeezed and crushed out to purple the garments of
Dives,
Poured out to colour the lips of Magdalen,
Magdalen who loves not, whose sins are loveless.
O this steady drain of the weary bodies,
This beating of hearts growing dimmer and dimmer,
This bitter indifference of the old men,
This exquisite indifference of women.

VI

Old men, you will grow stronger and healthier
With broad red cheeks and clear hard eyes—
Is not your meat and drink the choicest?
Blood of the young, dear flesh of the young men?

VII

Ah, you women, cruel exquisite women,
What a love-fountain is poured out for you,
What coloured streams for your pleasure!

Go your ways, pass on, forget them;
Give your lips and breasts to the old men,
The kindly, impetuous, glowing, old men!
They who will love you indeed, indeed, dears,

Not as we do, drained of our blood, with weeping.
Sell yourselves, oh, give yourselves to the cripples,
Give yourselves to the weak, the poor forgotten,
Give yourselves to those who escape the torture
And buy their blood from the pools with weight of
gold.

Give yourselves to them, pass on, forget us ;
We, any few that are left, a remnant,
Sit alone together in cold and darkness,
Dare not face the light for fear we discover
The dread woe, the agony in our faces,
Sit alone without sound in bitter dreaming
Of our friends, our dear brothers, the young men,
Who were mangled and abolished, squeezed dry of
blood,
Emptied and cast aside that the lakes might widen,
That the lips of the women might be sweet to the old
men.

VIII

Go your ways, you women, pass and forget us,
We are sick of blood, of the taste and sight of it ;
Go now to those who bleed not and to the old men,
They will give you beautiful love in answer !
But we, we are alone, we are desolate,
Thinning the blood of our brothers with weeping,
Crying for our brothers, the men we fought with,
Crying out, mourning them, alone with our dead ones ;
Praying that our eyes may be blinded
Lest we go mad in a world of scarlet,
Dripping, oozing from the veins of our brothers.

January, 1918.

PART II

Love

“Amor si dolce mi sa fa sentire
Che, s'io allora non perdessi ardire,
Farei, parlando, innamorar la gente.”

Dante.

PRELUDE

How could I love you more?
I would give up
Even that beauty I have loved too well
That I might love you better.
Alas, how poor the gifts that lovers give—
I can but give you of my flesh and strength,
I can but give you these few passing days
And passionate words that since our speech began
All lovers whisper in all ladies' ears.

I try to think of some one lovely gift
No lover yet in all the world has found;
I think: If the cold sombre gods
Were hot with love as I am
Could they not endow you with a star
And fix bright youth for ever in your limbs?
Could they not give you all things that I lack?

You should have loved a god; I am but dust.
Yet no god loves as loves this poor frail dust.

AN OLD SONG

I have no lust nor care
To sing of Mary,
I praise the quaint sweet air
Of a mortal lady.

She is not clothed in sad
Raiment like Mary
But in cloth and silk that is glad
And full seemly.

Her eyes are not tear-rimmed
Like those of Mary,
Only with love are they dimmed
When she kisses me.

By God, though she be God's mother,
I care not for Mary,
Only to serve this other
That is so dear to me.

Therefore, sweet friends, I know,
By the splendour of Mary,
Into uttermost hell shall I go
For sweet sin with this lady.

SONG

“Lady, let me woo you with song,
Words choicely got,
With strains intense and long.”
She smiled and answered not.

“Lady, let me sing your praises
All through the day,
Hymn you with lovely praises.”
She smiled and turned away.

Then I came and caught her hand,
Saying without fear:
“You are mine—do you understand?”
She smiled: “How I love you, dear!”

SONG FOR HER

Why should love be dumb and go
Hidden in a shroud of lies?
Why should lovers fear to tell
What they see in women's eyes?
What it is all lovers know
And the world should know as well.

Is a woman's heart of ice?
Is a woman's sex of snow?
I've a mistress and I see
Warm desire that moves me so
I would give the whole world thrice
To express it worthily.

Every night that we can steal
Close, as lovers do, we lie,
And the wanton things we do
And the amorous pangs we feel
Told, would make the hard world cry,
"Teach us how to love like you!"

Yet if you would love aright
You must love, like us, with all
Sense and spirit, flesh and breath;
Then indeed it may befall
That you burn with our clear light--
Light that only fades with death.

POSSESSION

I have held you with joy and passion,
With ecstasy sharp like pain—
Blind with your kisses, dumb with desire,
Shuddering at the fierce bliss of your touch.

Thus I have loved you, thus held you mine;
But I must hold you in grief and anguish,
In the long agony of childbirth;
I must hold you by shame,
I must hold you by despair,
I must hold you by sin,
I must hold you in death.

I must possess you utterly
And utterly must you possess me;
So even if that dreamer's tale
Of heaven and hell be true
There shall be two spirits rived together
Either in whatever peace be heaven
Or in the icy whirlwind that is hell
For those who loved each other more than God,
So that the other spirits shall cry out:
“Ahi! Look how the ancient love yet holds to them
That these two ghosts are never driven apart
But kiss with shadowy kisses and still take
Joy from the mingling of their misty limbs!”

AN INTERLUDE

There is a momentary pause in love
When all the birth-pangs of desire are lulled
By poppied kisses, when not yet begins
The light strong life of love that lives indeed
Through many dappled days of good Spring weather,
A pause when all the senses are bound up
Like flowers to form a garland, which her hand
Will scatter for delight upon her bed.

One waits,
And glides upon the crested surge of days
Like some sea-god, with tangled dripping beard
And smooth hard skin, who glimpses from the sea
An earth-girl naked by the soft foam fringe,
And, utterly forgetting all his life,
Flings toward the shore, is caught up by a wave
And hurried toward her, glad with sudden love!

Even in that pause of speed I live;
And though the great wave curl in spikes of foam
And crash me bleeding at her cool small feet
All breathless with the waters' sudden swirl,
I shall be glad of every stabbing wound
If she will hold my tired limbs to hers
And breathe wild love into my mouth and thrill
Even the blood I shed with that desire
Which throbs all through me at her lightest touch.

BEFORE PARTING

Love, though the whole earth crumble and rock,
With the shattering roar of the guns' huge booming,
Though in that horror of din and flame and murder
All men's blood grows faint and their limbs as water,
Though I return once more to the terror of battle,
Though perchance I be lost to you for ever—
Give me, O love, your love for this last brief season,
Be mine indeed as I am yours for ever.

To-night there shall be no tears, no wearing sorrow,
No drawn-out agony of hope, no cold despairing,
Only we two together in a sudden glory
Of infinite delight and sharp sweet yearning,
Shutting out for a space the world's harsh horror.

Kiss my lips with your mouth that is wet with wine,
Wine that is only less keen than your lips are,
Slip from your fragile garments as a white rose
Slips from under her leaves to the naked sunlight;
Give to my eyes your straight young body,
The limbs that embrace me, the breasts that caress me,
Hold me to you as I hold you and kiss me,
Whisper to me the sudden words of yearning,
The broken words that speak an infinite yearning
That delight would last for ever, love never be ended.
Let me take you with all my senses, all my days, dear,
All the days that built up my flesh and framed me
A man to be your lover, a man to mate you,
A man whose flesh is white with desire for you.

Take me also, make me yours, as a woman
Who knows love's torture, who is burned with the same
burning,

Only can take the lover herself has chosen
Until his broken sobs mix with her love-plaint.

Take me thus and I care not if death come after,
For to-night there shall be no tears, no wearing sorrow,
Only our kisses and whispers and stabbing heart-beats.

PRAAYER

Lord and father of life,
Of death and of bitter weeping,
One or many, pitiful or cruel,
Hear me, my prayer beating
Like rain importunately, without intermission,
For life, for a little life.

Lord, you know not her or love
If you let death take me.
I will speak outright:
No God, no nation, no cause,
No life of any man, no person,
Nothing created or living
Do I love as I love her.

I do not ask you for her—
No god can take her from me,
Take her kisses and lithe body.
I ask life, a few years
To pour out for her,
Until she tires of me
Or age loosens my sinews
And I be no more delightful to her.

Her body is honey and wheat,
The taste of her mouth delicate;
Her eyes overcome me with desire,
Her lips are a woman's.
Under her feet I spread my days
As soft silk for her walking,

She touches me with her hands
And I am faint with beauty.
The embraces of her body are wonderful,
They are more to me than wisdom and honours.

Therefore I am not willing to die
Since she needs me.
For her sake I would betray my comrades,
I would rend the vesture of the most high!

Yet if you are so avid of blood
That even she cannot move you,
Poor God without a lover,
Slay us together, mouth to mouth and happy
And we will thank not curse you.

I

I do not even scorn your lovers—
They clasped an image of you, a cloud,
Not the whole life of you that's mine.

II

I do not even pity my mistresses—
Such a poor shadow of desire
Their half-warm passion drew from me.

III

You are a delicate Arab mare
For whom there is but one rider;
I am a sea that takes joyfully
Only one straight ship upon my breast.

IV

Look, like a dark princess whose beauty
Many have sung, you wear me
The one jewel that is warmed by your breast.

V

See, as a soldier weary of fighting
Turns for peace to some golden city,
So do I enter you, beloved.

VI

The scarlet that stains your lips and breast-points—
Let it be my blood that dyes them,
My very blood so gladly yielded.

VII

Let it be your flesh and only your flesh
That fashions for me a child
Whose beauty only shall be less than yours!

VIII

Everlasting as the sea round the islands
I cry at your door for love, more love,
Everlasting as the roll of the sea
My blood beats always for you, for you,
Everlasting as the unchangeable sea
I cry the infinite for space to love you!

IX

Earth of the earth, body of the earth,
Flesh of our mother, life of all things,
A flower, a bird, a rock, a tree,
Thus I love you, sister and lover;
Would that we had one mother indeed
That we might be bound closer by shame.

ABSENCE

Day after day fades from me,
Each one cold and wan
Because you are not near me.

Night after night drifts past,
Cheerless, indifferent,
Because you are not with me,
Because I have not your lips to burn me
Awake to a great rapture,
Because you are not gripping me close to you,
Because your eyes are not looking into mine
With the keen entreaty of desire,
Because the loveliness of your flesh is denied me,
Because each night I lie alone.

I am fierce, indignant, humiliated—
To be chained away from you
When I desire you above all things.
Half I possess you, half hold you, half keep you;
But would all of you satisfy my desire?

I am insatiate, desperate—
Death, if need be, or you near me,
Loving me, beautifully piercing me to life,
But not this, not this bitterness, this grief,
This long torture of absence.

HER MOUTH

I

Her mouth is a crushed flower
That unpetals marvellously
Beneath my lips.

II

The perfume of her flesh stays with me,
Dwells in my mouth and nostrils
After she has gone,
So that no flavour of wine or flower
Can conquer it.

III

The crimson that dyes her lips
Dyed mine, so close were our kisses ;
All day I felt its soft caress
Making smooth my lips.

IV

She has but to turn her head
And lay her lips to mine
For all my blood to throb tumultuously :
She is so shudderingly beautiful.

V

When I am bitter sad
With the emptiness of harsh days
The memory of her kissing mouth
Burns me to gladness.

DAYBREAK

The naked pale limbs of the dawn lie sheathed in dove-white folds of lawn
But from one scarlet breast I see the cloudy cover slowly drawn.

Not all the blood of all our dead, the bright gay blood so gaily shed,
Shines with so clear a glow as gleams your breast-flower peering from our bed.

All night your body lies and throbs, with cries of love and amorous sobs,
Close to my blood-flushed limbs till dawn with gleaming fingers comes and robs

Our bright bed of your limbs and hair, and I can only lie and stare
And moan in weakness for my loss and crush my brow in sharp despair.

Ah, bend above me, dear, and take my life breath with your lips and break
My body up as wheaten bread and use my very blood to slake

Your parching sudden thirst of lust! Be cruel, love, be fierce and thrust
Your white teeth in my flesh and taste how honey-sweet is amorous dust!

Ah ! slay me with your lips, ah ! kill my body's strength
and spirit's will,
So that at dawn I need not go but lie between your
breast-flowers still.

SLEEP

If but to sleep alone be fair
As poets say,
How piercing sweet to lie all night
Until the day
With all her flower-like body pressed
Close unto mine,
To feel her moving heart, to taste
Her breath like wine,
To hold her pointed, smooth, soft breast
In one firm hand
And let the other lie at rest
In love's own land.

Ah, it were good to cease and die
So sweet a way,
Never to waken from her bed
To the chill day,
But sleep forever in a dream,
Head beside head,
Warm in a golden swoon of love—
Divinely dead.

A SOLDIER'S SONG

How sadly for how many nights
My dear will lie alone,
Or lie in other arms than mine
While I lie like a stone.

If she remembers me or weeps
For her lost happiness,
Though dead, I shall be pierced at heart
For her great loneliness.

If she forgets me, if she gives
Her lips and limbs to new desire,
Though dead, I shall be pierced at heart,
Burned stark by a sharp fire.

I would not have her pine and weep,
Nor would I have her love again—
Whatever comes after I die
There will be only pain and pain.

I dare not ask for life, I dare
Only to ask for utter death
So that I may not know she breathes
Life from another's amorous breath.

NIGHTS OF LOVE

O the nights of love,
The nights of close long kisses,
Of the passionate clasping of two bodies
So delighted with poignant touch;
O the nights of warm adoration,
Of the meeting of breasts and hands,
Of the joining of flesh with flesh;
O the nights when the world was abolished,
When the city outside was forgotten
When the moon seemed not to shine
And nothing endured but our love;
O the nights of peace after love,
Of sleep with her head on my arm,
Of our breathing mingled as one;
O the nights that were day too soon,
When we hated the light of the sun
That severed our amorous flesh;
O the nights when we needed no God,
When we needed no helper, no friend,
When we needed no good upon earth;
O nights I shall never forget,
You will sweeten the harshness of death,
You will thrill the last beat of my heart,
You will sooth my last moan into praise.

GAIN

Let not the jesting bitter gods
Who sit so goldenly aloof from us
Mock us too deeply,
Let them not boast they hold alone
The reins of pleasure, the delight of lust—
We also, we that are but air and dust
Moistening that dust a little with old wine
And kindling that air with fire and love
Have burned an hour or two with blossoming pangs,
And, leaning on soft breasts made keen with love
And murmuring fierce words of rending bliss,
Have gathered turn by turn unto our lips
The twin wild roses of delight,
The quickflower-flames that sear into the soul
Sharp wounds of pleasure and extreme desire.

POSTLUDE

Have I spoken too much or not enough of love?
Who can tell?

But we who do not drug ourselves with lies
Know, with how deep a pathos, that we have
Only the warmth and beauty of this world
Before the blankness of the unending gloom.
Here for a little while we see the sun
And smell the grape-vines on the terraced hills,
And sing and weep, fight, starve and feast, and love
Lips and soft breasts too sweet for innocence.
And in this little glow of mortal life—
Faint as one candle in a large cold room—
We know the clearest light is fed by love,
That when we kiss with life-blood in our lips
Then we are nearest to the dreamed-of gods.

EPILOGUE

*Back we go to the shell-tossed land,
To the whine of the shells that tears one's nerves
And the crash that's only not near enough;
Back we go to struggle with mud,
To stumble and slip on the greasy boards,
Back we go to the stink of the dead,
Back we go to the sleepless days
And the unwashed weeks and the mouldy months,
Back we go to the thirst and the dust,
Back we go to the grim despair
That holds a man by the heart in France.*

*We'll go through it all, the fear and pain,
The breaking up of body and soul,
Take our chance of death after all,
Of face or limb or shoulder smashed,
Go through hell again, face it out,
For her, for her love, for her kiss again.*

*Sneer or snarl, drivel or boast—
What does it matter to us who go
Where they who send us dare not go?
All one to us are the rights and wrongs,
The nations' squabbles, the nations' lies;
Not one land more than another land
Do we love, lovers of love not land—
So it's up the line and hell and pain
For her, for her love, for her kiss again.*

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